

Co-creating relevant knowledge through regional virtual collaboration: The Latin America Scholars Community case

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As business has become increasingly global in nature during the 21st century, business schools' international collaborations have gained more importance since schools look for greater relevance and bigger positive impact on society. In the case of Latin American business schools, the development of international partnerships and collaboration agreements has certainly gone hand in hand with the advent of countries' open economy and the ensuing rise of multinational companies, along with more regional firms becoming global. Yet, as the level of global trade is higher than the level of intra-regional trade in most Latin American countries, this has seemingly prompted an imbalance between global vs regional partnerships developed by schools in the continent¹. However, this imbalance may change significantly in the future given the more recent challenges to principles of globalization arising from the global pandemic and the Ukraine invasion. Indeed, this may accelerate the need for stronger regional collaborations in handling such issues as supply chains and regional logistics as well as pedagogy and research in many areas of management education.



WHY TO PURSUE NEW INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATIONS AMONG LATIN AMERICAN BUSINESS SCHOOLS?

Just as in other regions of the world, while there are many reasons or goals for business schools in Latin America to look for international collaborations, some of the most common are:

- To provide their students and faculty with a global perspective by exposing them to different business practices and worldviews and better equip them to succeed within the international arena. This can be fulfilled through a wide array of collaborative agreements such as exchange programmes, study trips, visiting periods abroad, double or dual degrees, joint or consortium programmes, among many others. Still, one of the main issues for MNCs is to understand Latin America as a whole and become regional players.
- For complementary reasons. For instance, if a business school is regarded as the best school in Finance in the continent, but entrepreneurship is not precisely one of its strengths, to acquire meaningful insights on entrepreneurial topics and offer an enhanced learning experience to its students, the school might be interested in developing an international partnership with a business school that excels in entrepreneurship.
- To develop a unique position in a certain field (or region). In the previous example, the top-notch school in Finance could also be interested in partnering with a really good business school in Finance from another country or region, either for offering a unique programme in such field or for collaborative research purposes and build a very powerful international alliance. Furthermore, schools in Latin America have not really exploited the advantages of collaborating among themselves to develop content and

programmes with a regional approach, neither to produce comparative research on the continent². Collaboration and healthy competition should co-exist in the modern business school!

- To enhance the school's reputation. Sometimes, when looking for a collaborative agreement a business school in the region might be only interested in brand association for reputational purposes as partnering with an international strong brand can also enhance its school or programme brand value in the local market, greatly benefiting its graduates and faculty members.
- To enter and/or better understand new markets. If a school is interested in entering and/or better knowing certain market, it can think about partnering with a local school. Indeed, it is pretty common to see US business schools interested in entering an emerging market – like the Latin American market – through a joint programme with a local partner.

KEY SUCCESS FACTORS WHEN SETTING INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATIONS

Regardless of the purpose or reason behind why a business school is interested in developing a new international or regional collaboration, based on the experience that I have had when setting up either a double degree, a joint programme, or a research network, there are five elements that I have identified as key success factors when implementing such collaborations. These elements are:

- 1) First, to have a sound value proposition for both parties.
- 2) Second, to have a common challenge and/or strategic objective.
- 3) Third, to have certain degree of similarity between schools in terms of strategy, expectations, and structure. It is highly unlikely that a partnership between a small, private business school in Latin America and a large public university in the US can work. Decision making in the first one will be rather fast most of the times, while the large US school may need to wait for the State Board of Governors for approval. And no need to say that expectations in terms of number of students enrolled will be completely different.
- 4) Fourth, it is very important to have shared ownership and leadership, including a project leader in each institution and well-defined responsibilities for each partner.
- 5) And last but not least, collaboration depends on people, therefore true willingness to do it is an essential ingredient as well.

The presence of these five elements was essential in the creation and success of the Latin America Scholars Community, a virtual regional research network, as will be explained as follows.

THE LATAM SCHOLARS COMMUNITY

While the business environment in Latin America is characteristically Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous (VUCA) and very different to the one that exists in developed economies – where most management theories were devised –, there is a clear predominance of US and European management content in schools of the region. There is a lack of knowledge on how to conduct business in the Latin American context and business schools have not seized the opportunity to create it, hence their contribution to the economic development of the region has not been fully exploited. Despite the greater weight given to research in many schools on the continent, this endeavor has not been focused on developing a deeper understanding of Latin America and business schools in the region now face the challenge of creating their own knowledge and identity³.

Therefore, as part of the closing conversation of the first Latin America Business Education Jam held in partnership with the Questrom School of Business in Boston University – an event that attracted over 1,800 followers on Facebook from 17 Latin American countries including business schools' deans, faculty, students, and alumni in a series of discussion forums to share ideas with a common goal: to increase the value of Latin American management education –, two core reflections emerged: The pressing need to develop a distinctive value proposition for Latin American business schools and the potential impact of doing it in a collaborative way.



There was a major criticism about adopting business school's models that were not conceived for the Latin American context. Hence, it was suggested that the unique value proposition for schools in the continent should emerge from studying and addressing the societal problems prevailing in the region. In this way, schools' common goal and challenge would be creating knowledge that is relevant to the continent and to the world, while increasing their impact on business and society.

Given the utmost importance of developing novel insights about the region and enhancing the value and relevance of Latin American management education, the idea of creating a research community attending the abovementioned value proposition emerged. As a result, the "Latin America Scholars Community", a network of researchers focused on developing content about the continent, was launched in June 2019. Its main objective is to promote collaborative work among professionals doing academic or applied research on five initial topics:

- Social entrepreneurship (current state, new business models, impact investing, social impact metrics, etc.), as well as all issues related to poverty, income inequality, and inclusive growth.
- Corruption (economic and social costs) and ethical leadership.
- Family business (e.g., dynamics, evolution, professionalization, corporate governance, succession).
- Gender (e.g., female leadership, women in top management, levelling the playfield, support systems, among others).
- Management education (e.g., innovative teaching and learning methodologies, including hybrid and online offerings; stackable degree programmes; lifelong learning; micro-certificate programmes; academic vs applied research activities, etc.).



In addition, since there is a low level of overseas awareness of Latin American schools and hardly any appears among the top 100 business schools in the world, this initiative can also support schools in the region to address the challenge of developing a distinctive positioning in the global market and attract more foreign students, thus advancing the internationalization of Latin American business schools.

Currently, the network has a total of 174 researchers from 27 business schools located in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, and Peru, and EFMD as global sponsor. To date, the number of researchers participating by topic is as follows: 68 in Social entrepreneurship, 37 in Corruption and ethical leadership, 32 in Family business, 29 in Gender, and 59 in Management education.

HOW DOES THIS INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH NETWORK WORK?

Regular interaction among members of the network is virtual and by group of interest. In addition, a face-to-face event addressing topics from the different research groups is planned to take place every year. The idea is that the venue of the annual event rotates among business schools participating in the region and during the event attendees have the opportunity to share and discuss their research ideas and explore new collaboration opportunities, while expanding their research network and strengthening the existing one.

IPADE Business School was the host of the first event of the network "Building Research Communities among Latin American Scholars", where more than 80 participants from 16 different schools worked together to define priority issues to analyse in the region in the years to come. Furthermore, the event included a Deans' Panel about Value, Relevance, Impact, and Collaboration, in which the following topics were addressed: (a) key elements to develop a distinctive value proposition for business schools in the region, (b) effective mechanisms through which Latin American business schools can increase their impact on society and businesses, (c) how to include and foster the development of locally relevant content in the research agendas of business schools in Latin America, and (d) how regional collaboration among schools can contribute to the three themes previously raised. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face events are currently paused.

In March 2021, thanks to the support of EFMD Global, the Latin America Scholars Community website (<https://latam.scholarscommunity.org/en/>) was launched with the aim to continue promoting collaborative work among researchers of the network. The website has two main purposes: give visibility to the network, its members, and its research work,

and providing a collaboration platform to facilitate interaction between researchers. In doing so, the website serves as an easy means to identify potential co-authors and get access to their contact information, previous work, and current research interests in detail. Yet, once the initial contact has been established, researchers may work independently of the platform. Some examples of collaborative projects that have arisen thanks to the Latin America Scholars Community include a research project on corruption and ethical leadership in Mexico and another one between Peruvian and Mexican business schools about gender.

On top of all that has been previously described, certainly, one of the most important contributions of the Latin America Scholars Community has been to create a wide and rich avenue that will change the culture of business schools in the region towards meaningful collaboration. As such, ownership and leadership of the initiative is shared through the sponsorship of all schools in the network, and it will have leaders by country as well. Besides, although it is not an international collaboration in terms of an academic programme, its results will undoubtedly enhance the value of management education in the region by providing students with relevant content that will help them to better understand how to conduct business in the Latin American context, thus giving them an edge in the global arena. It would be great if business schools from other regions could join this initiative and build a network akin to the Latin America Scholars Community in theirs, allowing all our schools to develop comparative research on common topics and contribute to continue advancing business education worldwide.

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Footnotes

¹ G. Alvarado, H. Thomas, L. Thomas, and A. Wilson, *Latin America: Management Education's Growth and Future Pathways* (Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing, 2018).

² Ibidem.

³ Ibidem.



About the Author

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